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ABSTRACT

One common sense approach to college teaching might simply be to implement those practices that are proven reliable and frequently review the methods that seem to result in learning and those that do not. Guidelines based on some instructional approaches that have worked at Mohawk College in Ontario, Canada include the following: (1) assume that students are motivated and will have a real interest in some aspects of the topic; (2) ensure that each teaching session has a definite structure incorporating a logical sequence of tasks or objectives; (3) permit students to use the instructor's lecture notes, reference books, and other resource materials; (4) make certain that the instructor is available to students outside of class; (5) resist the tendency to rely on handouts, as the act of taking notes helps students retain information; (6) provide a fairly rigid structure for small group work; and (7) review the accomplishments of the previous teaching session at the beginning of the present one. Informal student feedback will provide a gauge to measure the effectiveness of the instructor and these instructional strategies. (AJL)

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GOOD TEACHING IS COMMON SENSE

A BACKGROUND PAPER FOR
SESSION 2A406E
ACCC CONFERENCE '88,
"THE HUMAN DIMENSION"

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A LITTLE BACKGROUND.....

Let me begin by telling you something of what we teach in the Computer Studies Department at Mohawk College.

Obviously "*Computer Stuff*" you are thinking. Things like DOS and LOTUS and dBASE and maybe even some BASIC programming thrown in for good measure. Well you're right, we do teach those things, but we teach many other subjects much broader in scope. For example, we delve deeply into the systems analysis and design discipline and get into high level topics such as Management Information Systems. We even touch on esoterica like Artificial Intelligence... which reminds me of a story that is usefully anecdotal.

Research in the field of Artificial Intelligence (also sometimes called Expert Systems) continues to approach the basic problem of creating computer programs that "*UNDERSTAND*" using two-valued, yes-no logic because this binary logic system is compatible with computer hardware design.

Lofti Zadeh at the University of California (Berkeley) believes that real Artificial Intelligence will continue to elude us until we use what he calls *Fuzzy Logic* to attack the understanding problem.(1) We humans of course, employ Fuzzy Logic all the time. We use fuzzy quantifiers such as many, few, most, tall, and create Fuzzy Logic Bridges to get from one previously unlinked thought to another.

This kind of thinking is more widely known as common sense thinking or just plain common sense. I hasten to add here that there are many other things that are not fuzzy and are clearly common sense. More on that later. But back to Zadeh. Zadeh says it is this ability of ours to operate in a common sense way that allows us to do so many intelligent things that so far, computers cannot.(2)

I keep this little tale in my mental file because it reminds me, as a teacher of High Tech subjects, I had better communicate and otherwise interact with students in an intelligent, common sense fashion. Put another way, communicating with students must not be like two computers engaged in some form of data communication. A lot of data may be exchanged but not much understanding will result.

A CLIMATE THAT CAUSES LEARNING....

Well enough of that. What I was trying to do was present a rather uncommon perspective on common sense, related to my particular field.

I should tell you something of my college environment for context and because it plays an active role in many of the common sense practices I will describe later on.

Mohawk College is a very large college of applied arts and technology based in Hamilton, Ontario. It had approximately 12 000 full time and 57 000 part time enrolments in 1986-87.

The Computer Studies Department where I am one of 22 faculty, delivers a number of 2-year and one 3-year program producing graduates pursuing careers in computer operations, computer programming, and systems.

At peak times enrolment has reached about 650 in our programs and most students are involved in cooperative education, so there is close contact with a large number of important employers.

Some of the information above suggests a huge impersonal diploma mill. However nothing could be further from the truth. The college rose from humble and small beginnings where an important tradition was the close, informal, almost mentoring relationship that very frequently established itself between teacher and student. Surprisingly, this tradition has been retained. Mainly it comes across as attitude and atmosphere, but the college consciously puts into place policies, procedures and practices that are undeniably student centered.

I will give you some examples of these later, but the point I wish to make is the college makes every effort to provide a framework of support that helps faculty and students get the important job of learning accomplished.

THE HUMAN DIMENSION.....

The theme of Conference '88 is The Human Dimension and as I was reading the theme statement, I was particularly struck by its concluding paragraph, that says in part, "Colleges that do not adopt the necessary tools and methods needed to provide quality service to our clients may be doomed to failure".

Now in truth, colleges in Canada no matter how poorly they serve, are not very likely to fail. That is they will not close down and disappear from the scene. More likely they will continue to limp along doing a miserable job.

That is a gloomy view.

Here is a brighter one.

When we consider that we deliver our service to society through the individual student, or in keeping with today's theme, the human client,then it is reasonable to argue that college success rests largely with how well we as Facilitators/Learning Managers/Teachers, handle the Understanding Problem alluded to previously. Our innate ability to use judgement, and draw on our experience, to employ fuzzy logic when necessary, should help us render a quality service. All the better I might add, if the institutional environment is strongly supportive of our work.

Our challenge is a version of Zadeh's understanding problem; how to cause understanding or learning in our students. Of course we must start with some minimal facilities base and add teacher expertise to it, but if we buy Zadeh's line of thought, then common sense thinking and communication applied in the teaching-learning process will be crucial in the provision of quality service to our clients.

We often lament the lack of big new buildings, more up-to-date equipment, more comprehensive support services and so on. No doubt these are legitimate needs, but I would suggest that in many instances, we could make up the implied learning deficit by diligently employing common sense teaching practices.

Before moving on I would like to share with you a view expressed by a dean at a Big 10 graduate school. He said

> "I take it for granted that every teacher should be interested in teaching, that he should work hard at the job, and that he should have good common sense. If he does not have those qualities, nothing will make him a good teacher. If he does have them he will learn by educating himself."(3)

While this view has been attacked by some as anti-intellectual, the dean was right on target with the importance he placed on common sense as a fundamental requirement. A last small point of interest, this view was expressed in 1946.

CHANGE, CHANGE, CHANGE.....

Steven Muller in the Post-Gutenberg University, said that universities (and I will add colleges) will have to come to grips with change and that change will affect us in four major areas:

1. The clientele we will serve will be substantially different;
2. We will have to deliver our services in new ways;
3. The content of our services will be different;
4. The style in which we operate will change.(4)

Muller is really saying every important element that defines our institutions will change and change significantly. This can be an exciting prospect, or a frightening one, or maybe both.

A related unsettling notion is that the world is growing increasingly complex. Jo Coudert puts it this way,

> "The world has become so complicated that we've lost confidence in our own ability to understand it. But common sense is as useful now as it ever was. At times you just have to trust your own judgement."(5)

Perhaps in our efforts to deal with rapid change and multiplying complexity, we will be overwhelmed and we will fail our clients. But on the other hand, as Coudert suggests, common sense practices may keep us on track and up to the task.

Change in the workplace feeds back to us and affects the four areas listed by Muller. Particularly in the colleges, we are expected to quickly react to changing employer needs and sometimes even anticipate them. Naisbit, in his Trend Letter, sets out what a good general strategy might be for educational institutions in meeting the challenge of the changing workplace. Naisbit states:

> "In a rapidly changing work environment, no single job skill will be more important than the ability to think and communicate. No one school subject will serve future workers better than learning how to learn."(6)

QUALITY AND HOW TO ACHIEVE IT....

In the systems design field we talk about which design considerations will produce a quality system, one that has desirable features and which satisfies the user. A good design will be one that comes out of a process where technical factors and human factors have been fully treated and the interaction between them thought out. The result should be an effective system, a quality system where quality and effectiveness are judged by the user.

We might think of teaching in a way analogous to the above. The student/client is the user of course, curriculum, content, and instructional technology are the technical factors and the students' needs and our various interactions with them are the human factors. We are the designers and it is up to us to design in quality if we want to *cause learning*.

The term 'Cause Learning' is used in a provocative way because it seems that teachers often don't know exactly what should happen as a result of teaching. K. Patricia Cross of Harvard, suggests we generally want to cause learning, which she sees as a process composed mostly of common sense practices.(7) Cross gives us three:

1. Provide an active learning environment.

   When students are actively involved in the learning task they learn more than when they are passive recipients of instruction.

2. Allow and even demand practice.

   Students need to be actively and *successfully* involved in learning tasks that lead to desired outcomes.

3. Set high but attainable goals.

   Academic performance, believe it or not, usually rises to meet expectations. (the Pygmalion Effect)

Looking at these practices, you may be saying to yourself, I do that, or maybe, I should do more of that! In fact Cross contends these relatively straightforward strategies are only rarely implemented in college classrooms. Our own common sense should tell us that we can be more effective by applying simple practices that are known to work.

Cross observed that colleges in the 60's and 70's concentrated on trying to bring about equality (access to education) and with that goal now largely achieved, concentration in the 80's and 90's will be on quality.(8) Quality is, you will have noticed, one of those fuzzy thinking words we mentioned earlier. It implies some acceptable degree or grade of excellence, but measurement can be challenging. A common sense approach might be to simply implement those practices that are proven reliable and frequently review for yourself the things you do that seem to work and of course, those that don't.

SOME THINGS THAT SEEM TO WORK..

What follows are a few rather general approaches that in some cases embrace a number of possible methods that I have found to be effective in the teaching process. I suppose you could call them strategies.

1. <u>An Assumption About Student Interest</u>

   I assume that students are motivated to be successful in my course. Furthermore, I assume there will always be topics of real interest no matter how boring the general subject might seem.

   This positive attitude is sensed immediately by most students and makes them more receptive and participative.

2. <u>Structure and Tasks</u>

   Every teaching session I have has a definite structure. There is a logical sequence of tasks or objectives. The students know this and generally are comfortable with it. We may not always follow the sequence exactly, but there usually is a clear sense of accomplishment when the session ends. If for some reason we don't get through everything planned for the session, we carry it over. If time does not allow that, an alternative way of achieving that objective is found.

3. <u>Students Can Use My Personal Notes and Materials</u>

   I lend students my lecture notes, (not copies) reference books and other resource material. They are always returned. Most often this occurs with part time students who are not in regular contact with other students. This is one of those no-cost support systems a teacher can put in place easily and which will help keep the student who is not strongly committed to the course, staying with it.

4. Be Accessible.

It usually is not enough to be available to students only for scheduled course hours. Some students will want to see you in your office, so it is sensible to inform students of your availability.If you judge it necessary, give them your home phone number. Access is important to students and these practices eliminate the old "I couldn't get in touch with you" excuse.

You will recall Muller said that our clientele will change. Well to a large extent, it already has. Students have jobs, children, and other responsibilities that often make communication difficult. If we can provide some alternative ways of keeping in touch, let's do so.

5. Handouts, Handouts, Handouts.

In many situations where I could provide handouts to students, I don't. "Why?" you ask," is it not an easy way to share material?" Of course it is and sometimes it is a good and necessary practice. However, there are things on my agenda besides simply distributing the written word. If I do not distribute the material, it means I will have to find some other mode of transmission to the students and therefore I will have to re-think it a bit and be creative.

So let's say I decide to take a very conventional approach and deliver the material in lecture style using the board and perhaps also overheads. Now I am assured that many of the students will read or hear the material at least once. Hopefully most will also have written , in note form, some or all of the material. The recording by hand of something you see or hear is generally thought to produce better retention than simply seeing it.

If you saw the Nick Nolte film Teachers, you likely remember the teacher whose only teaching act was to give handouts. Students came in, picked up the handout and worked on them until the class period ended. During one of these sessions the teacher died at his desk. No one noticed!

6. Plan Carefully for Small Group Work.

Due to the nature of systems work, I often want students to work in small project groups. This can be a good simulation of what happens in the

workplace, but it is necessary to provide a fairly rigid structure to make it a productive activity.

I hold frequent, brief, scheduled meetings with each group and I require all group members to attend every meeting. The time is used to check progress against a workplan and to discuss problems and future direction.

If a "people" problem is obvious in the group, I schedule a special meeting to deal only with that problem. Often, the group will have worked out a solution before the meeting actually takes place.

Usually I find I have to do very little. Groups perform responsibly. I suspect this is so because the assigned systems project is hard work and very time consuming. In this case, group performance rises to meet expectations.

7. Use Simple Devices Routinely

By devices I mean methods of presenting material, ways to organize a teaching session and processes for communicating with students.

An example is the time-tested method (habit really) of always briefly reviewing what was accomplished during the previous teaching session at the beginning of the present one. You might say, "Everyone does that!" And I would say to you that based on feedback from students, it is a rarer practice than any of us would think.

Now the value of this simple practice is that it ties sessions together, gets the student ready to move on, and likely helps the teacher focus more clearly on upcoming material.

Let me add a note of caution by way of another little story that might be called "The Professor Who Reviewed too Well".

Some years ago, I was enrolled in a course that dealt with the political history of Australia. The professor had been a very active participant in Australian federal politics in the 1940's and 1950's and had an astounding depth of knowledge to share. He was a firm believer in starting each three hour lecture with a review of the previous lecture's material. Unfortunately for us this device completely took over, and it seemed sometimes the review was longer than the original presentation.

> As the end of the course drew near, some of us could "lip-Sync" the first hour or two, after all, we had reviewed the material a dozen times!

Before leaving this topic I want to mention a practice implemented by my college that is of a common sense nature and in my opinion, improves the student's probability of success in their program. This practice is the faculty member as class advisor. In this role the teacher is the student's chief contact for course and program information. However the primary value to the student is in having a real live person to talk to. This is critically important to first year students who are struggling to adjust to the often frustrating college environment, and those other students who are having academic difficulties and personal problems. This important contact point connects the student with many other more specialized services provided by the college While this role is not teaching per se, it is something best done by the teacher and contributes to the goal of causing learning.

WHAT IS GOOD TEACHING?....

If you think I am going to set out a definition then I am sorry but you will be disappointed. Would it not be better to use student feedback as a gauge to measure your effectiveness? Now I do not mean some formal evaluation tool, but informal feedback. A couple of examples may help:

1. When teaching a management course, students start to give you un-solicited articles from periodicals that pertain to a topic discussed in the course.

2. After giving a truly mind-numbing final assignment in a course, students put notes on their submissions indicating how much they enjoyed a particular part of the course, or even the whole thing!

Common sense should tell us when the above behaviour takes place we must be doing some things right. We may not know specifically what, nor does it matter really, because most likely we have evolved a style of teaching that employs the simple, effective practices described by Cross,and others of our own that we are satisfied and comfortable with.

ENDNOTES

1. L. A. Zadeh, " Coping With the Imprecision of the Real World,an interview", Communications of the ACM, April, 1984, pp 304-311.

2. Zadeh.

3. F. Payne," The Evaluation of Grade School Teachers", in Problems of Faculty Personnel, Russell, J., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1946, pp 60-67.

4. Steven Muller, "The Post-Gutenberg University", A. A. H. E. Current Issues in Higher Education, 1983-84, No. 1.

5. Jo Coudert, "Experts Make Mistakes Too", Woman's Day, Aug., 1985.

6. Johh Naisbit, Trend Letter.

7. K. P. Cross, "Teaching for Learning", A. A. H. E. Bulletin, April, 1987, No. 3.

8. K. P. Cross, "Can Higher Education be Equal and Excellent Too?, A. A. H. E. Current Issues in Higher Education, 1982-83, No. 1.

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